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# Young People and the Formation of Attitudes towards the Police

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Key Words: social attitudes, confidence, trust, police, young people

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## **Abstract**

Much is now known about public trust and confidence in the police, especially regarding the important role of procedural justice in police-citizen engagements. However, less is known about perceptions of the police among young people and how their views are formed. We use survey data from more than 1,500 young people aged 10-15 whose parents were also interviewed in the Crime Survey for England and Wales (2010-12) to explore the extent that children's views of the police correspond with those of their parents. We find a strong and consistent link between the views of children and their parents – a relationship moderated by perceptions of police visibility, experience of victimization and the age of the child.

## Introduction

It is widely recognized that trust and confidence in the police are more fragile among young people than adults (Flexon et al., 2009; Hurst and Frank, 2000; Hinds, 2007). This has been explained with reference to young people's greater use of public space and heightened contact and conflict with the police (Loader, 1996; McAra and Mcvie, 2005; 2010), including negative experiences of policing (Carr et al., 2007; Fagan and Tyler, 2005; Hinds, 2007; Piquero et al., 2005). Yet despite research demonstrating a link between young people's attitudes to the police and contact with the police, few studies have examined the formation of these attitudes. In particular, the role that parents might play in shaping the views of their children remains under explored. Given that many young people will not have experienced direct contact with the police, the influence of parental attitudes on confidence in the police could be substantial and long lasting.

Drawing on data from more than 1,500 young people (aged 10-15) and their parents interviewed in the Crime Survey for England and Wales between 2010 and 2012, we explore whether young people's attitudes to the police are informed by the views of their parents, or whether direct experiences of policing and crime are more influential. This unique dataset enables us to make more robust claims than have previously been possible about the ways in which the views of children may align with those of their parents.

This study makes two key contributions to the limited existing evidence base on young people's attitudes towards, and experiences of, the police and policing. Firstly, drawing on studies identifying close similarities in parent and child attitudes (Jennings and Niemi, 1968; Moen et al., 1997; Solomon et al., 2008) we examine whether or not children's attitudes towards the police are aligned with parents, and whether the strength of this alignment is different for children of different ages. This alignment may be the result of socialization and the strength of social bonds with parents, with the reciprocal interactions between children and their parents facilitating the development of similar moral outlooks (Kohlberg, 1969; Maccoby, 1992). Secondly, we examine the contribution that direct experiences of the police play in the formation of young people's attitudes. Between the ages of 10-15 young people undergo physical and mental maturation, change their routines and interactions with friends and parents, make greater use of public spaces outside the home, and at times, engage in delinquent behavior – factors which can increase the chances of encountering the police. Our research explores what impact actual contact with the police has on young people's attitudes, and examines whether parental views of the police might temper or exacerbate any effect of personal experiences of policing. Drawing from previous research which finds that procedurally

just treatment of citizens by police corresponds with higher levels of trust (see reviews in Jackson et al., 2012), as well as from Skogan's (2006) concept of 'asymmetric trust', we further assess whether or not the police can feasibly achieve an increase in confidence amongst young people through direct contact.

### ***Young people's attitudes towards the police***

When compared to adults, young people's attitudes towards the police tend to be more negative (Hurst and Frank, 2000), with the levels of negativity increasing during the latter teenage years (Fagan and Piquero, 2005; Piquero et al, 2005). Recent reports have documented problems of distrust between young people and the police, notably for suspects, victims of crime, and detainees in police cells who experience routine violation of rights and a lack of concern for personal welfare (UK Parliament, 2014). As young people begin to socialize more with peers in public spaces away from the parental gaze, adversarial contact with the police is generally increased (Loader, 1996; McAra and McVie, 2005). Whilst congregation in groups as a means of youthful expression and leisure has always incurred police attention (e.g. Emsley, 2005), this has more recently been politicized further through legal powers to tackle low-level disorder (Millie, 2009, McCarthy, 2014). Evidence from studies examining young people's experiences of policing has demonstrated that certain social groups are more likely recipients of police attention – typically young males, ethnic minorities, and working class youth (McAra and McVie, 2005; UK Parliament, 2014).

Involvement in delinquency is a crucial determinant of police contact, and this varies substantially by age. When asked about their own offending, as many as 22% of those aged 10 to 25 admits committing an offence during the previous 12 months (Roe and Ashe, 2008), with studies suggesting that involvement in offending is most likely to begin between the ages of 13 (Moffitt, 2001) and 15 (Graham and Bowling, 1995). Key onset factors include associating with delinquent peers, truanting from school and limited parental supervision, factors which may also facilitate a greater propensity to utilize public space to engage in offending, thus incurring further police attention. McAra and McVie (2005) found that initial contact with the police in early adolescence (approximately aged 12 onwards) coupled with regular subsequent interactions actually increased offending, fostering further hostility and defiance towards the law (see also McAra and McVie, 2007). They also show that police enforcement in poor neighborhoods overwhelmingly leads to a focus on the 'non-respectability' of youth as a precondition of suspicion, reflecting a clear social class bias in policing. This has resulted in a

core group of young people receiving repeated contact with the police and youth justice system at large, increasing risks of conviction and delaying the processes of desistance (McAra and McVie, 2010).

In studies from North America, trust in the police amongst ethnic minority communities is found to be considerably lower than in white communities (Flexon et al., 2009; Hurst et al., 2000; Skogan, 2006). Contact is again important, with the heightened use of stop and search powers against black and other minority youth one cause of this distrust towards the police (Crutchfield et al., 2012). Where policing is perceived as discriminatory in communities, it is also likely that news of this will travel, thus influencing the attitudes of a wider number of people (Flexon, et al., 2009; Hurst and Frank, 2000; Rosenbaum et al, 2005). The concept of 'legal cynicism' (Sampson and Bartusch, 1998) has been used to explain why ethnic minorities may have different perceptions of the police and why crime may be higher in areas of high ethnic concentration. Rather than understanding ethnic minorities' attitudes to police as rooted in a separate subcultural value system, the implication of legal cynicism is that experiences of police distrust are the result of direct negative interactions. Kirk and Papachristos (2011) find that legal cynicism can spread vicariously as people living in specific neighborhoods communicate news of injustice and racial bias. Perceptions of the police are similarly affected by crime levels in specific neighborhoods. Dirikx et al (2012) showed that the most critical attitudes towards the police came from those aged 17-19. The authors attributed this to the older group having more frequent police contact, especially those living in high crime areas, who were more likely to have experienced a combination of negative police contact and higher frequency of negative vicarious information about the police.

Studies assessing ethnic minority experiences of policing are largely US-based, where a very different history of racial and ethnic stratification is evident compared to the UK (see Loury et al., 2005 for discussion). This relates to differences in the demographic composition, volume and spatial residency of ethnic minorities in the US, coupled with different histories and experiences of race and policing. That said, there remain some important overlapping features, with the UK similarly reporting well-known disparities in police stop and search of young (typically male) ethnic minorities, resulting in fragile trust relations with the police in some communities (Bowling and Phillips, 2007). Yet other studies have identified ethnic minorities in the UK as actually possessing more positive attitudes to the police when compared to white residents (Jackson et al., 2009; Sindall and Sturgis, 2013). According to Bradford (2014), this may be because non-British nationals are more sensitive to fair treatment because of their

marginalized social status, thereby developing a stronger positive identification and belonging with the police when contact is positive.

It is clear that relationships between young people and the police can be negative, particularly for those who use public space frequently, reside in high crime communities, come from ethnic minority groups, as well as those who have had direct contact with the police. However, a growing literature argues that the *nature of interaction* with the police can also alter youth perceptions. Insights from procedural justice research show that fair processes and respectful treatment of young people can increase legitimacy and compliance with the law (Fagan and Tyler, 2005; Hinds, 2007; Murphy, 2015; Piquero et al., 2005). Fagan and Piquero (2005) also find that the quality of interactions with the police influence legitimacy. Positive contact with the police may also influence the extent to which young offenders trust the police (Piquero et al., 2005). Murphy (2015) has argued that young people can be more sensitive to variations in policing than adults, due to higher levels of contact with the police, being suspicious of police authority, perceiving police as a threat to their independence, and having self-identities that are more uncertain. Consistent with social identity theories (e.g. Tajfel, 1982; also Tyler and Blader, 2000) procedurally just policing communicates to people a sense of shared moral membership between the authorities and the public, thereby establishing greater levels of cooperation. Prior to late adolescence/early adulthood, young people are less likely than adults to have established secure identities (Vollebergh et al., 2001), perceiving themselves as lacking rights and the social standing to be listened to and represented by authorities (Carr et al., 2007).

It is also possible that even good policing may do little to remedy youth distrust with the police. For example, Skogan (2006) finds that procedurally just policing has little or no impact on public trust, but unjust or unfair policing can deteriorate relations with the public significantly, a phenomenon he calls 'asymmetric trust'. Skogan's analysis reveals that the public place greater emphasis on negative experiences of the police, a 'negativity bias' by which 'bad things are learned more quickly, and forgotten more slowly' (Skogan, 2006: 106). Flexon et al (2009) demonstrate support for this argument in a sample of young people from high school. Therefore, the achievement of cooperation and compliance through procedurally just policing is a fragile process, with clear challenges for the police in successfully achieving these outcomes.

From adult studies there are additional potential drivers of confidence in the police that have not been assessed in studies of young people. For example, being a victim of crime may alter how people perceive the police and their own personal safety (Brick et al., 2009; Cao et al.,

1996). People who perceive a lack of safety and security in the area can also have lower confidence in the police (Garcia and Cao, 2005; Payne and Gainey, 2007), as can those who perceive a lack of neighborhood cohesion (Jackson et al., 2009). Evidence of gender differences in attitudes towards the police is mixed, with some studies finding no differences (Hinds, 2007; Moretz, 1980) whilst others find either males (Weitzer and Tuch, 1999) or females (Flexon et al., 2009; Hurst and Frank, 2000) have more negative views.

### ***Attitude formation in young people: The influence of parental interaction***

Brinthaupt and Lipka (2012: 7) describe early adolescence – the period approximately from the ages of 10 to 14 – as characterized by ‘increased self-consciousness, introspection, inner conflict, stress, uncertainty, and disorientation’. From early adolescence onwards, young people begin to experience an array of changes to aspects of their lives including social routines (e.g. school and leisure), peer interactions, altered relations with parents, and through socio-psychological development (including biosocial changes, formation of new identities, and attitudes). As young people begin to transition into the latter stages of adolescence/early adulthood (approximately 18-24 years), the influence of parents begins to diminish, with attitudes generally diverging from parents (Vollebergh et al., 2001). This change in the level of influence of parents in late adolescence/early adulthood is associated with young people beginning to establish greater independence via work, education and relationships, together with building more secure and stable self-identities and attitudes.

Contrasting studies find a stronger overlap between parent and child attitudes beyond adolescence and into adulthood (e.g. Jennings and Niemi, 1968; Moen et al., 1997; Solomon et al., 2008). These results can be explained by two processes; firstly, that children tend to occupy similar forms of social status and environments as their parents by the point of early adulthood, and as may such share similar attitudes as a result (Bengtson, 1975; Glass et al., 1986); and secondly, that attitudes may be transmitted directly through socialisation in the familial setting when children are growing up (Kohlberg, 1969; Maccoby, 1992).

A small number of studies have examined the processes underlying the formation of attitudes to the law and police. Fagan and Tyler (2005), in their study of 10-16 year olds, found that initial perceptions of legitimacy were high, before declining sharply and then stabilizing between the ages of 14 and 16. More positive perceptions of legitimacy were evident amongst young people who were subject to a greater degree of parental supervision, pointing to the possible effect of strong family attachments in cultivating attitudes to the law. Fagan and Tyler



also note that the intervening effects of delinquent peers, exposure to violence and aggression, and neighborhood structure play a role in shaping attitudes, specifically moral disengagement – the process of detachment and moral treatment of others. The authors find greater levels of moral disengagement amongst the younger groups, suggesting differences in moral controls during the early adolescence period. Schuck (2013) similarly finds that attitudes to the police are more positive at younger ages (10 to 13 years old), declining thereafter before stabilizing as young people reach the ages of 16 to 18. That the early adolescent period is associated with increasingly negative views of the police is consistent with the effects of a more general state of youthful rebellion, cynicism towards authority and uncertain self-identities (Murphy, 2015) which seemingly influence the formation of attitudes. It is only around the ages of 16-18 years that the majority of young people begin to adopt more normative views of the police.

Assessing the social and developmental antecedents of attitudes to the law, Nivette et al (2015) found that legal cynicism – broadly capturing the legitimacy of the law and trust in criminal justice authorities – was formed early and remained moderately consistent between the ages of 13 and 15 years. Young people who were more disconnected from their parents and school had higher levels of legal cynicism, highlighting the effect of weak social bonds as a possible theoretical mechanism underpinning attitude formation. Unsurprisingly, young people involved in delinquency also had higher levels of legal cynicism, suggesting that legal cynicism may be conditioned through direct and vicarious contact with the police, and be more likely where *fewer* connective ties exist between the young person and institutions such as school and family.

Sargeant and Bond (2015) find that youth perceptions of their parents' attitudes are positively associated with their own attitudes to the police, even after taking into account police-initiated contact, peer delinquency and prior delinquency. They also show that positive attitudes to the police were most evident amongst young people with stronger maternal attachments. The authors did not, however, explain why maternal attachment was associated with favorable attitudes towards the police, and rely on youth interpretations of their parents' views, not direct measurement of primary parental attitudes. Similar research from Wu et al (2015) finds associations between strength of attachment with parents and favorable views of the police. Unlike Sargeant and Bond, they find emotional attachment with fathers was responsible for stronger attitudes in young people.

## **Data**

In 2009 the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW)<sup>ii</sup> was extended to incorporate the views and experiences of youth (aged 10-15). This study utilizes data from young people whose parents were also interviewed in the 2010/11 and 2011/12 rounds of the survey. This makes it possible to link children's attitudes to those held by their parents, enabling us to directly examine the extent of value alignment. The CSEW adopts a multistage sampling design, with a total of 92,310 adults interviewed between 2010/11 and 2011/12 (a response rate of 75% was achieved in both sweeps). At each eligible household, details of all young people aged between 10-15 were recorded, with a sample of 5,558 subsequently selected for interview at the same time as the adult questionnaire in 2010/11 and 5,717 selected in 2011/12. This resulted in a total of 7,760 interviews with young people (a 68% response rate was achieved in both sweeps). Survey items covering attitudes to the police were fielded to a random subsample of these individuals, resulting in a final analytic sample of 1,657 young people (Fitzpatrick and Grant 2011; Home Office 2011; TNS-BMRB, 2012).<sup>iii</sup> It was common for parents to be present during the youth survey, particularly amongst the youngest children. For example, in 2011/12 only 12% of those aged 10 were interviewed alone, rising to 37% of those aged 15.

#### *Confidence in the Police*

We use a general measure of confidence, which asks young people whether their 'opinion of the police in this area' is positive, neutral or negative. Whilst not enabling as nuanced an assessment of attitudes towards the police as items that focus on specific elements of policing, research concerning adults' confidence in the police has demonstrated that these global measures of confidence are a good proxy for opinions about the police's ability to tackle crime, demonstrate procedural justice and engage with the community (Jackson and Bradford 2009; Stanko and Bradford, 2009). Fewer than 5% of young people reported a negative opinion of the police, with 42% holding a neutral view and more than half (53%) holding a positive view. The large number of neutral opinions is interesting, suggesting a comparatively large degree of ambivalence towards the police. Our analysis is primarily focused on identifying what drives young people's confidence, therefore the question has been coded '1' if respondents felt positive and '0' otherwise.<sup>iv</sup> Full summary details for all variables are included in table 1.

Table 1 about here.

#### *Experiences of Crime and Policing*

Three items were included to capture young people's experiences of crime and policing: personal victimization; contact with the police; and perceptions of police visibility. In the 12 months prior to interview, 29% of the sample reported being the victim of crime (including actual or attempted theft, damage to property, violence and threats). Contact with the police distinguishes those people whose experience of contact was rated as 'satisfactory' from those who rated their contact as 'neither satisfactory nor dissatisfactory' or 'dissatisfactory'.<sup>v</sup> Perceptions of police visibility were measured using a single item asking how often they had seen police officers or Police Community Support Officers<sup>vi</sup> on foot or bicycle in their local area in the last 12 months: never, less than once a month, about once a month, about once a week, once a day, or more than once a day.

#### *Parental attitudes to the police*

Parental attitudes towards the police are measured with a total of 6 items from the adult survey that were combined using principal components analysis. These items covered: the extent to which parents agreed that the police can be relied upon to be there when you need them; would treat you with respect if you had contact with them; treat everyone fairly regardless of who they are; understand the issues that affect the community; are dealing with the things that matter to people in the community; as well as a general measure of confidence in the local police. All items are closely related, with a cronbach's alpha of .89. The principal components analysis yielded a single component solution that we treat as an overall measure of parents' confidence in the police.<sup>vii</sup>

#### *Background characteristics*

Background characteristics of both young people and their parents are also included, selected on the basis of their salience in studies of adult confidence in policing. The inclusion of these items goes some way to accounting for the influence of known correlates of youth *and* adults' perceptions of the police. This gives us greater confidence that our analyses are identifying the process of attitude alignment between parents and their children, rather than common causes of parental and child attitudes.

From the youth survey, the included socio-demographic variables cover: gender; age; and ethnicity. We also capture young people's assessments of the local area, measured with a single item asking whether they agree that the local area is 'a friendly place to live'. From the parent survey, socio-demographic characteristics cover: gender; age; socio-economic status; education level; and marital status. In addition we include parents' experiences of victimization

in the previous 12 months (including actual or attempted theft, damage to property, violence, threats and sexual assault), and perceptions of safety, measured with a single item asking 'how safe do you feel walking alone in this area after dark'.<sup>viii</sup>

Finally, we include basic characteristics of the broader environment. Disorder is captured using survey interviewers' ratings of the extent to which rubbish, vandalism and housing in poor condition are common in the immediate area surrounding each respondent's home (combined using principal components analysis).<sup>ix</sup> The three items had a cronbach's alpha of .87. This is supplemented by a binary indicator distinguishing rural from urban areas.

### **Analysis strategy**

Binary logistic regression models are used to examine whether confidence in the police is shaped by personal experiences of crime and the police. Data from the main adult CSEW is linked to data from the sampled youth, enabling us to also identify whether young people whose parents hold more favorable views of the police are themselves more favorable.

To gain a clearer understanding of the process of attitude formation, we also include interaction effects between our measure of parental confidence in the police and characteristics of the child. The interaction effects allow us to examine attitude alignment as a developmental *process*, and whether and under what conditions the views of parents tend to be replaced by personal experiences. For example, an interaction between age and parents confidence would help pinpoint *if* and *when* young people's attitudes tend to diverge from those of their parents.

### **Results**

Table 2 includes results from four models of increasing complexity examining the links between young people's views of the police and those of their parents. Looking first at the unconditional association (model 1), we find significantly higher odds of holding a favorable view of the police amongst those young people whose parents hold more positive opinions. The close correspondence between the views of children and their parents remains of a similar magnitude when background characteristics of young people (model 2), their parents (model 3), and the broader environmental context (model 4) are accounted for. This gives us some confidence that the observed relationship is not simply an artefact of the shared social and ecological context of children and their parents. It is clear, then, that the views of children track those of their parents. To give some idea of the magnitude of this association, young people with parents who have more positive views of the police (1 standard deviation above the average) have approximately 30% higher odds of holding a positive view themselves. This is

roughly the same size as the impact that direct victimization experience has on confidence, and is larger than the impact of increased police visibility.

Table 2 about here.

Models 2-4 reveal a number of additional drivers of confidence in the police. Looking first at the characteristics of the young people themselves, we see that confidence is generally higher amongst females. In contrast, older children tend to have lower levels of confidence, with the odds of reporting confidence falling by approximately 20% for each annual age increment. In common with studies focused on adults, confidence is also driven, in part, by exposure. Those that see the police in the area generally hold more favorable views than those that do not. However, whilst this form of indirect exposure can play a positive role, the same cannot be said for more direct contact with the police. Here, our results echo the findings of Skogan (2006), with those young people who had contact with the police that they evaluated as satisfactory being no more likely to have a positive view of the police than those who had no contact, but those that were dissatisfied being significantly less likely to hold a positive opinion. Confidence is also lower amongst those young people that had been victimized in the past year. No differences are evident between the views of minority and white young people, but confidence is more likely to be present amongst those that perceive the local area is a friendly place to live.

The experiences of parents are also influential in shaping the perceptions of their children, over and above the direct link between parent and child perceptions of the police. Specifically, we see that the views of young people are less favorable if the interviewed parent had been victimized within the last year, but more favorable if the parent reported being married.

With regard to the broader environment, we find no direct evidence that the levels of disorder, or whether the local area is classified as rural or urban influence levels of confidence.

Reflecting the important contribution that parental confidence in the police plays in shaping the views of their children, we conclude with an exploration of the extent that the role of parental confidence differs as a function of a young person's own personal biography (table 3). Three significant interaction terms between parental confidence and characteristics of young people are evident, with attitude alignment moderated by age, whether they had been a victim of crime and the extent of police visibility. All other effects were almost identical to model 4 and are omitted for brevity.

Table 3 about here.

The strength of the association between the views of parents and their children changes as children get older. This is shown graphically in Figure 1, which plots the predicted probabilities of young people having confidence in the police against parents' confidence for each age group. The fitted values are for a 'typical' young person (when all other variables in the model are fixed at their average value). Parents' level of confidence in the police is the least salient for the views of the youngest, with all those in this age group having a similar probability of holding a positive view irrespective of the views of their parents. The correspondence between child and parent confidence strengthens progressively with age, with the views of the oldest children more closely mirroring the views of their parents. This suggests that the attitudes of parents and their children become more tightly aligned as children grow older, and that more favorable parental attitudes have the effect of limiting the general decline in attitudes to the police as young people get older.

Figure 1 about here.

The importance of parental confidence is also determined by the degree of police visibility, with the strength of the association between child and parent confidence increasing with the frequency of police sightings (Figure 2). The association between parent and child confidence is weakest among those young people that rarely see the police in their local area. The association then strengthens with each increment of police visibility. In other words, the more frequently someone sees the police in their neighborhood, the more strongly their opinions of the police align with those of their parents.

Figure 2 about here.

Figure 3 shows that confidence is also more closely tied to parental attitudes toward the police when the young person has been a victim of crime. The negative effect of victimization on confidence is significantly attenuated as parents' confidence in the police increases.

Figure 3 about here.

## **Discussion**

The ages of 10-15 are a crucial time where attitudes are formed and begin to stabilize (Jennings et al., 2009; Vollebergh et al., 2001). This is also the time when young people are most likely to experience the 'sharp end' of police-public interactions, with higher levels of involvement in crime, and a disproportionate propensity to be stop and searched (McAra and McVie., 2005; Sharp and Atherton., 2007). This arguably makes young people's views of the police particularly susceptible to change, influenced either by direct experiences or indirectly via the vicarious experiences of others. In this study we explored one such indirect source of influence on young people's views of the police – the opinions and experiences of parents. Drawing on linked survey data that enabled us to connect the views and perceptions of young people with those of their parents, we have been able to better understand the extent that the views of children and parents are shared and diverge.

We find a strong and robust link between the perceptions of children and their parents. Those young people whose parents have more positive views of the police tend to hold more positive views themselves. That this alignment of the views of children and their parents remains when account is taken of the background of the child, parent, and the broader environment, gives us confidence that we are not simply observing a spurious association caused by an external shared influence. This lends empirical support to theoretical work examining intergenerational transmission (Jennings and Niemi, 1968; Moen et al., 1997; Solomon et al., 2008), which argues that through the period of socialization young people's attitudes come to closely resemble those of their parents.

The extent of intergenerational alignment in attitudes is, however, dependent on age. We find that this attitude alignment is strongest amongst the oldest young people. This means that whilst perceptions of the police are generally more negative amongst older youth, this is less apparent if parents hold more favorable views of the police. Intergenerational attitude alignment between children and parents, then, does not stop when young people reach the teenage years – a period during which young people might begin to have contact with policing and so be assumed to form independent views. Police visibility in the local area also acts to modify this shared view. The alignment of attitudes is least effectual when young people rarely see the police in their neighborhood, but is increasingly important if police are more visible within the local area. One possible explanation for this effect is that police sightings give rise to conversations about the police and policing between parents and children that may not occur in the absence of such visual stimuli, thus providing conditions for learning and attitude alignment. However, it is beyond the scope of this data to examine this mechanism further.

Experience of victimization has regularly been linked to more negative assessments of

the police (Brick et al., 2009; Cao et al., 1996), a finding we confirm when looking at young people. However, parental attitudes can act as a buffer on such negativity, where effects of victimization on confidence are trumped by parents' positive feelings toward the police. This suggests that socialization and attitude alignment can be more powerful in shaping the views of young people than their own real life experiences of crime. We find other, indirect evidence of the alignment of views between parents and their children via the vicarious experiences of parents, with a significant negative association between a parent's experience of victimization and their children's view of the police, over and above the direct effect of personal victimization.

The household environment also influences young people's views of the police, with children from married households reporting more positive views of the police. In contrast, the broader social environment is less influential, with no clear influence of urbanization, or neighborhood disorder. We did, however, note more favorable views from those young people who feel the area is a friendly place to live. This is consistent with findings from studies of adult confidence in policing, with the public forming judgments about the police based not just on their effectiveness at tackling crime, but also on their ability to protect and uphold the stability, order and cohesiveness of local neighborhoods (Cao et al., 1996; Jackson and Bradford., 2009).

Other personal and experiential factors are also associated with assessments of the police. In support of Fagan and Tyler (2005) we find that young people's confidence in the police declines as they get older. Prior research has suggested that this is a result of greater use of public space and increased contact with the police. Indeed, like Skogan (2006) we found an asymmetrical effect of direct contact with the police. Those young people that had a negative experience were significantly less likely to hold favorable views, yet we find no corresponding improvement amongst those that had a positive experience. Like adults, then, the police seem only able to damage relations with young people, with little room to promote improving views through direct contact alone. We also confirm the positive effect of police visibility revealed using adult samples (Sindall and Sturgis, 2013), with those young people that reported seeing police around more frequently generally holding more positive views. Findings from adult studies in the US have consistently shown that ethnic minorities hold less favorable views of the police. Contrary to this, we find no evidence of differences in attitudes toward the police amongst British ethnic minority youth. This accords with similar studies of UK adults, which have tended to reveal a mixture of null results and those which show that ethnic minorities are more confident in the police than white citizens (Jackson et al., 2009; Sindall and Sturgis 2013).



Whilst our data has allowed us to assess the degree of attitude alignment between parents and their children, the fact that only one parent was interviewed in the CSEW means that we cannot be sure that the effect is consistent across parents. However, we believe that it is unlikely that this will lead to spurious findings. Rather, it is more likely that any inconsistencies between parents' views will only have served to attenuate the association between parent and child attitudes. In other words, in our sample it is likely that some non-interviewed parents will hold contradictory views and transmit mixed messages to their children, yet we still find an association between the interviewed parent and child's attitudes. If both parents were to hold the same opinion, it is likely that the association we find would be even stronger. A high proportion of young people were also interviewed in the presence of their parents. This leaves open the possibility that our results are, in part, a reflection of a social desirability bias, with those young people that were interviewed in the presence of parents being more likely to present a more favorable view of the police. Given that only 12% of those aged 10 were interviewed alone, rising to 37% of those aged 15, this may help to explain the strongly positive ratings of the police amongst young people, and the decline in positive views amongst the oldest young people. To explore this possibility, additional models were estimated that identified whether or not the young person was interviewed alone. This was not significant, and had no material impact on our conclusions, therefore it is unlikely that our results are a reflection of distorted reporting practices. Furthermore, social desirability bias would not explain the closer degree of alignment amongst older children.

We were also limited in the range of variables we could include in the model. For example, factors such as the patterns in the use of public space, associations with delinquent peers and propensity to engage in delinquent behavior might also be important predictors of confidence in the police, but such measures were not available for use. Finally, whilst our results are consistent with the interpretation that positive attitudes towards the police decline as young people get older and that opinions formed in childhood might carry forward into adult life, we are working with cross-sectional data. Future research would benefit from taking a longitudinal approach. The use of panel data would allow an exploration of the ways in which attitudes might change within individuals across the life-course, and whether or not intergenerational alignment persists when young people enter adulthood, particularly in response to experiences of crime and contact with police. This would also allow us to address more conclusively whether it is parental attitudes that are influencing those of their children rather than the reverse process (e.g. De Mol and Buysse, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

Surprisingly few existing studies have examined the attitudes of young people towards the police. In this paper we have added to this limited evidence base, exploring the drivers of young people's confidence in the police in England and Wales. Drawing on theoretical arguments concerning the existence of a process of attitude transmission between parents and their children, we have, for the first time, used robust data and measures to demonstrate the existence of attitude alignment within the context of attitudes to the police. We have shown that the views of children and their parents are similar even after having controlled for their shared social and environmental context.

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**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

	N	%
CHILDREN		
Confidence in policing: Positive	834	53.0
Negative/neutral	741	47.0
Victim of crime: No	1176	71.0
Yes	481	29.0
Contact with the police: None	1179	72.6
Satisfactory contact	360	22.2
Non-satisfactory contact	85	5.2
Perceptions of police visibility: Never	561	34.9
Less than monthly	207	12.9
Monthly	323	20.1
Weekly	358	22.3
Daily	123	7.7
More than Daily	34	2.1
Local area a friendly place to live: Agree	1316	80.5
Neither agree nor disagree/disagree	319	19.5
Age: 10	240	14.5
11	281	17.0
12	283	17.1
13	299	18.0
14	269	16.2
15	285	17.2
Gender: Male	863	52.1
Female	794	47.9
Ethnicity: White	1421	86.2
Asian	99	6.0
Black	64	3.9
Mixed	45	2.7
Other	20	1.2
PARENTS		
Gender: Male	633	38.2
Female	1022	61.8
Age: 16-24	2	0.1
25-44	1040	62.8
45-64	606	36.6
65-74	6	0.4
75+	1	0.1
Qualifications: None	239	14.4
GCSE	428	25.9
A Level/Apprenticeship	334	20.2
Degree	591	35.7

Other	63	3.8	
NS-SEC: Professional/Managerial	676	41.2	
Intermediate	310	18.9	
Manual/routine	580	35.3	
Unemployed	47	2.9	
Student	29	1.8	
Marital status: Unmarried	627	37.9	
Married	1028	62.1	
Victim of crime: No	1151	69.5	
Yes	504	30.5	
Perceptions of safety: very/a bit unsafe	387	23.4	
Very/fairly safe	1267	76.6	
	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Confidence in the police	1588	.07	1.04
AREA			
Interviewer rated physical disorder	1649	-.03	0.97
	N	%	
Urban or rural: Rural	402	24.3	
Urban	1255	75.7	

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Source: CSEW (2010/11-2011/12)



**Table 2: Logistic Regression Models Predicting Children's Confidence in the Police (Odds Ratios)**

	Model 1: Parent perceptions of the police		Model 2: Young person characteristics		Model 3: Parent characteristics		Model 4: Area characteristics	
	Odds Ratio	S.E	Odds Ratio	S.E	Odds Ratio	S.E	Odds Ratio	S.E
Parent confidence in the police	1.32***	0.07	1.30***	0.07	1.28***	0.07	1.27***	0.07
YOUNG PERSON								
Female			1.29*	0.15	1.31*	0.15	1.29*	0.15
Age			0.80***	0.03	0.80***	0.03	0.80***	0.03
Ethnicity: (Ref. White)								
Asian			1.10	0.26	1.20	0.31	1.17	0.30
Black			0.67	0.21	0.81	0.26	0.78	0.26
Mixed			0.53	0.19	0.57	0.21	0.57	0.21
Other			1.82	1.04	2.44	1.53	2.37	1.48
Victim of crime			0.68**	0.09	0.71*	0.10	0.71*	0.10
Local area a friendly place to live			2.64***	0.40	2.42***	0.38	2.47***	0.39
Contact with police: (Ref. None)								
Satisfactory contact			1.22	0.17	1.24	0.18	1.25	0.18
Non-satisfactory contact			0.38***	0.11	0.40**	0.12	0.40**	0.12
Perception of police visibility			1.18***	0.05	1.20***	0.05	1.20***	0.05
PARENT								
Female					1.05	0.14	1.05	0.14
Age					0.99	0.01	1.00	0.01
NS-SEC: (ref. Managerial/professional)								
Intermediate					1.03	0.17	1.01	0.17
Manual/routine					0.92	0.14	0.89	0.14
Unemployed					0.92	0.36	0.88	0.35
Student					1.22	0.53	1.19	0.52
Qualifications: (Ref. None)								
GCSE					1.47	0.29	1.48	0.30
A Level					1.58*	0.33	1.61*	0.34
Degree					1.26	0.26	1.27	0.26
Other					1.24	0.42	1.24	0.42
Marital status: (Ref. Unmarried)								
married					1.36*	0.18	1.38*	0.18
Perceptions of safety					1.05	0.16	1.05	0.16
Victim of Crime					0.75	0.10	0.74*	0.10

AREA									
Interview Rated Physical Disorder								0.97	0.14
Urban area								1.07	0.07
Constant	1.05	0.09	5.03***	2.36	4.02*	2.53	3.88*	2.48	
Survey Year: 2010/11 (Ref. Cat.)									
2011/12	1.11	0.12	1.14	0.13	1.15	0.14	1.14	0.14	
Sample size	1511		1433		1419		1413		

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\*\*\* p<=.001, \*\* p<.01, \*p<=0.05; Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales (2010/11-2011/12)

**Table 3: Logistic Regression Models Predicting Children's Confidence in the Police (Odds Ratios)**

	Model 5: Interactions	
	Odds Ratio	S.E
Parent confidence in the police	0.27**	0.13
Age (young person)	0.80***	0.03
Victim of crime (young person)	0.69**	0.09
Perception of police visibility	1.19***	0.05
INTERACTION EFFECTS		
Parent confidence * age (young person)	1.11**	0.04
Parent confidence * victim (young person)	1.29*	0.17
Parent confidence * police visibility (young person)	1.08*	0.04
Constant	4.53*	2.94
Sample size	1413	

Figure 1. Predicted probabilities for children's confidence in the police by parental confidence and age.

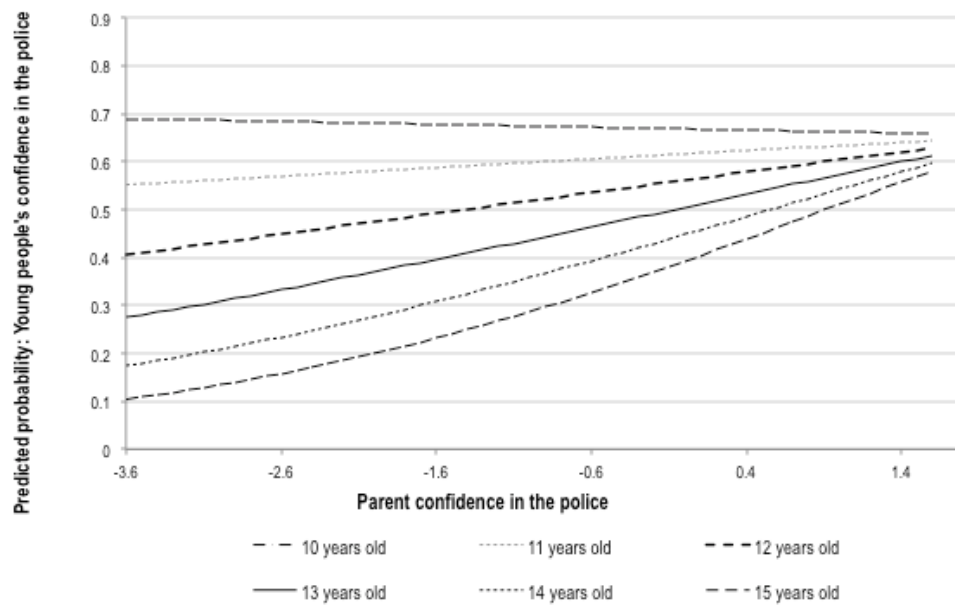
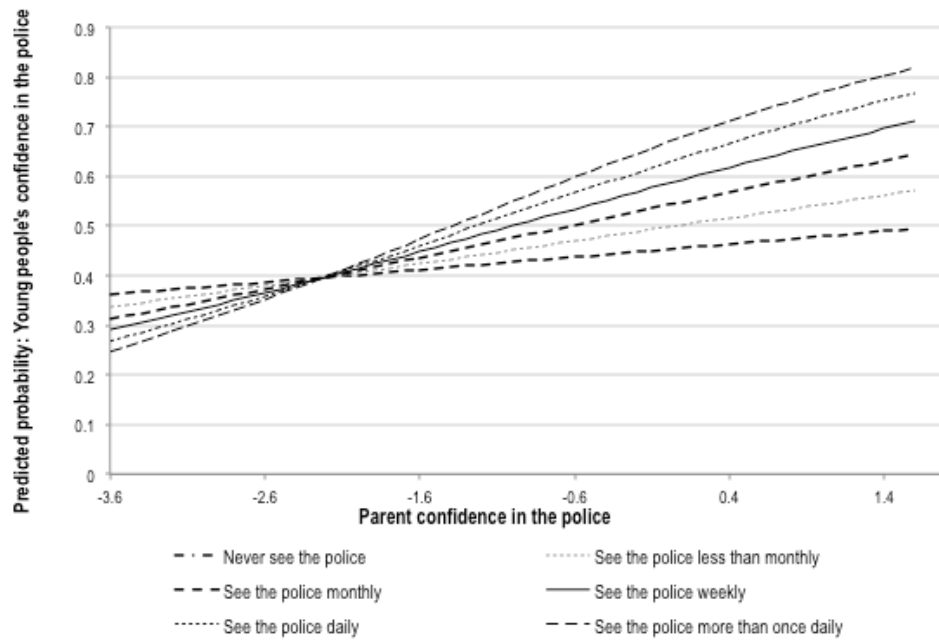
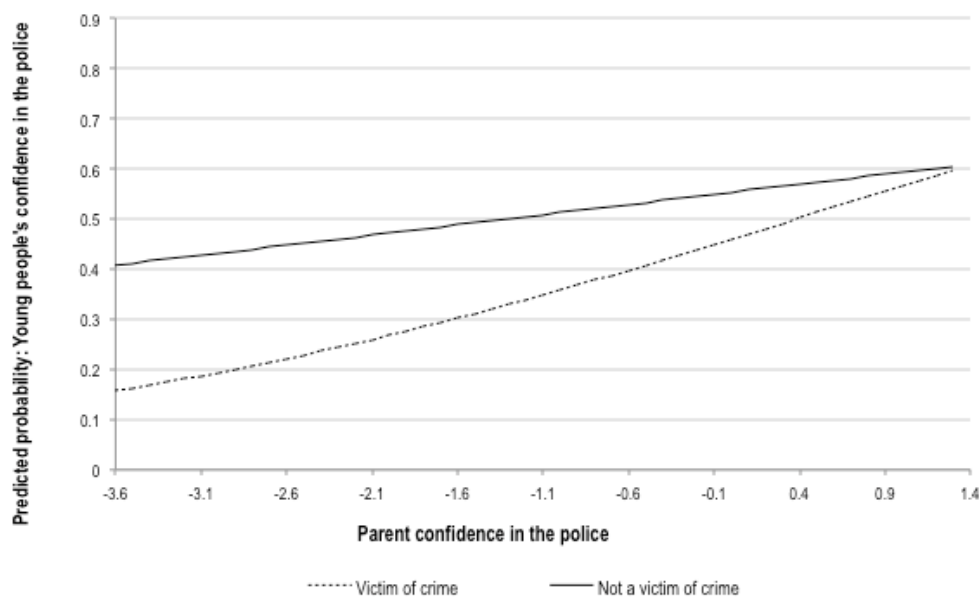


Figure 2. Predicted probabilities for children's confidence in the police by parental confidence and police visibility.



**Figure 3. Predicted probabilities for children's confidence in the police by parental confidence and children's experience of victimisation.**



<sup>i</sup> Throughout this article we use the term ‘young people’ to reflect the general period of development between early childhood and adulthood, typically spanning the ages of 10-25. This period incorporates a number of related phases (e.g. childhood, adolescence, teenage years, early adulthood). These are socially, rather than biologically determined categories, and the precise age when people transition between them is often unclear. We therefore also refer to the exact ages of young people where available.

<sup>ii</sup> Formerly the British Crime Survey.

<sup>iii</sup> To account for potential sample differences between 2010/11 and 2011/12 all estimated models include a control variable identifying which sample each child is from.

<sup>iv</sup> Additional analyses that accounted for the ordinality in the original measure were also estimated, however no substantive differences were identified.

<sup>v</sup> Following the results of previous studies of adult confidence in policing, it would have been appropriate to split this variable into further groups based on whether the contact was initiated by the police or the respondent, but this resulted in too few respondents per category for analysis. Additional models only examining self- and police-initiated contact showed moderate evidence that children had more favourable views of the police if the contact was self-initiated. All other substantive findings were the same (results available on request).

<sup>vi</sup> Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) are paid uniformed police staff who carry out patrols and basic policing functions with certain restricted powers below those of sworn police officers.

<sup>vii</sup> All items made a substantial contribution to the extracted component, with the following factor loadings: .780 (reliable), .760 (respectful), .751 (fair), .815 (understand local issues), .832 (dealing with local matters of concern), .879 (overall confidence).

<sup>viii</sup> There has been considerable debate within criminology over the appropriate operationalization of fear of crime, with recent studies tending to favour more specific measures that detail responses to particular offences, and which directly ask about levels of fear or worry (Gray et al., 2008). More specific ‘worry about crime’ questions were only fielded to a subsample of CSEW respondents, therefore we rely instead on a more general measure of safety.

<sup>ix</sup> The principal components analysis yielded a single component solution with the following factor loadings: .881 (rubbish), .892 (vandalism), .907 (housing in poor condition).